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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 CONAKRY 000357

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [EINV](#) [EMIN](#) [ECON](#) [KCOR](#) [GV](#)
SUBJECT: POVERTY DRIVES EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN
ARTISANAL GOLD MINES

REF: CONAKRY 00233

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. Embassy officers visited a community artisanal mine close to the Guinea-Mali border where poverty forces hundreds of children to work in exploitative situations. The Upper Guinea region is highly dependent on the artisanal mine sector and children provide an unprotected source of income for their families. The conditions in the mine area and operations are extremely dangerous. END SUMMARY.

CENTURIES OLD SEARCH FOR GOLD

¶2. (U) Embassy officers visited the Doko artisanal gold mining area in Upper Guinea, approximately 30 kilometers from the Guinea-Mali border, to monitor the USG-funded Save the Children Trafficking in Persons (TIP) project. The Doko mine is located about 57 kilometers from the regional capital of Siguiri. Common throughout the region, mining operations have been the main economic activity in the Upper Guinea economy for centuries, followed by subsistence farming and trading. The site of present day Siguiri and the surrounding countryside were once the capital of the vast Mandingo Empire, whose gold jewelry and ceremonial pieces were legendary throughout Africa.

¶3. (U) Located approximately seven kilometers from the relatively prosperous village of Doko, the mining area is situated on a treed savanna bluff. The soil is red with the mineral wealth, and termite mounds cover the fields and ground along the dirt road to the mining area. Workers reach the site either on foot, by commuting in ancient trucks from Doko village, or by motorcycles, hundreds of which are scattered around the mining area.

HAZARDOUS WORK FOR LITTLE GAIN

¶4. (U) The arduous work at the mining site is done by hand, with women and children participating on a par with men. The only motorized machinery are the motorcycles and one rusty generator used to pump water out of the shafts in the rainy season. In contrast to the billion dollar industrialized mining operations in other parts of Guinea, these artisanal operations are relatively simple. A narrow shaft, routinely 50 meters deep, is dug by hand, straight into the ground. No rocks, safety barriers, or berms warn passerbys of the sudden plunge into the ground. The dirt is then hauled up in buckets by a simple pulley system operated by women who stand over the hole. Women and young girls then carry the dirt in pans on their heads to a washing area, in this case bowl-like indentations in the ground that cover large portions of the mining area. (Note. Community rules prohibit washing the dirt

in the nearby river, although PolOff was not able to verify if the rule is respected.) Bending over in muddy water up to their shins, women "wash" and strain the excavated dirt, hoping to see flecks of gold at the bottom of their gourds.

HAZARDOUS CONDITIONS

¶15. (U) The mining area and operations are extremely hazardous. Hundreds of unmarked shafts cover the ground following rich mineral veins. The deep shafts are very closely spaced with the distance between them no more than a foot wide, making walking around the area on the slippery dirt, leaves, trash and uneven ground, extremely treacherous. Miners carrying small pickaxes descend into the narrow shafts using finger and toe holds. No safety ropes are used. The most rudimentary attempts at safety, such as covering the mouth of a shaft with boards, are nonexistent. The nearest hospital is located in the town of Kankan, 192 kilometers away.

¶16. (U) When asked about accidents, the workers said that recently a miner had fallen into one of the shafts and it had taken several hours to get him out. The miners avoided listing or detailing accidents, perhaps out of superstition or bad luck. When PolOff asked about children falling into the shafts, the chilling answer from a miner provided little comfort, "Oh, more children drown in the wells in the villages than here."

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CHILD LABOR

¶17. (U) Hundreds of children were present and working in the mining area. Save the Children representatives confirmed that none of these children attend school. Infants were strapped to mothers' backs, and toddlers are hefted around by 5-year old girls. Children were caring for children, and youngsters eight years and up were actively engaged in mining operations, carrying dirt, running errands, and digging holes. Infants and exhausted mothers slept on the ground, other infants and toddlers sat in the dirt while their mothers labored.

¶18. (U) The shafts deemed to be exhausted of gold were abandoned and the miners stated that eventually the spent holes will collapse entirely. PolOff pointed to a woman with her infant washing dirt not more than five feet away and asked if the situation wasn't dangerous for them. The miners shrugged.

COLLAPSED MINE LEAVES 13 DEAD

¶19. (U) On May 8, 85 kilometers from Siguiri on the outskirts of Touletoni, an underground artisanal mine located below a mountain collapsed. Thirteen miners died and an unknown number were injured and taken to the hospital. The Siguiri Police Commissioner told PolOff that local officials had determined the mine was dangerous and had chased away the miners who returned at night to continue excavating under the mountain when the mine collapsed. The Commissioner confirmed that no children were among the dead.

COMMERCIAL CENTER

¶10. (U) So much commerce was taking place at the Doko mining area that when PolOff joked that Guinea's Ecobank should open

a branch under the trees, the weary miners chuckled. Surrounding the mining area, vendors sell used clothing, shoes, fruit, gasoline and other parts for the motorcycles, batteries, flashlights and meat for the food stands.

¶11. (U) The gold was bought from the miners on site. Seven buyers sat on a tarp at the edge of a ragged plastic tent with the overseer of the mine sitting cross-legged behind them. The buyers shared a calculator, and a cardboard box office contained scales with tiny brass weights. On June 4, the buyers purchased one gram of gold for GnF 125,000 (around USD \$25). (Note: The international gold price for the same date was USD \$35.) Save the Children representatives stated that the gold passes through many hands before it eventually reaches Conakry where it is sold to the Central Bank or smuggled out of the country.

COMPLEX INTERACTIONS

¶12. (U) The economic and social structures of the mine are complex and defined by village customs, traditions, land use patterns, social hierarchies and familial ties. A basic analysis of the economic structure reveals that the owner of the land receives GnF 5,000 (USD \$1.00) for each mine shaft that is dug; the village receives ten percent of the miners' profits; and the mine overseer takes one percent. The socio-economic situation is complicated by immigrant miners from other areas of Guinea, seasonal changes in employment, and shifting socio-economic alliances.

¶13. (U) In conversations with local officials and community members, PolOff noted the high level of awareness regarding trafficked children. Local officials and communities actively work with Sabou Guinea, a local NGO, and Save the Children, who have ongoing USG-funded TIP projects in the border area and in other regions of Guinea (reftel). However, the same level of awareness for exploited children did not seem to exist in the communities and with local officials. When Embassy LES suggested to the overseer of the mine that it would be safer for the children if a few women could care for them in an area at a safe distance from the mine, the director brushed aside these concerns.

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COMMENT

¶14. (U) Lack of economic opportunity drives families in the Siguiri region to the drudgery of artisanal mining. Guinean children commonly work to help their families and are routinely responsible for large portions of housework. Yet, unlike laboring in agriculture after school, the children at the mines are not attending school and are subjected to dangerous conditions.

¶15. (U) The lack of government regulation and oversight of the mine reflects a systemic disregard for the rights of children. Without concerted intervention, the children who labor in the Doko mine, and all the other artisanal mines in the area, will face a life of cyclical poverty. END COMMENT.
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